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Both Sides Now: Vendors and Librarians-Customer Service Department

Michael Gruenberg
Gruenberg Consulting, LLC, mike@gruenbergconsulting.com

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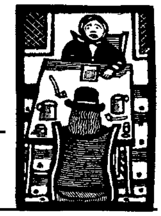
Both Sides Now: Vendors and Librarians — Customer Service Department



Column Editor: **Michael Gruenberg** (Managing Partner, Gruenberg Consulting, LLC)
<michael.gruenberg@verizon.net> *www.gruenbergconsulting.com*

Customer Service Department — No three words when grouped together in the English language have elicited such diverse descriptors that include: helpful, respected, misunderstood, incorrect, appreciated, frustrating and abused (sometimes more than one these terms are expressed simultaneously). It is irrelevant as to which industry. It doesn't matter about the products served and certainly not dependent on the salespeople and even less reliant on the reputation of company executives. I would bet that all of us have more than one horror story and more than one feel-good story about customer service experiences in our daily lives at home and at our place of employment.

The bottom line is that a well functioning customer service department means a successful business in any industry. And it all starts with the people on the phone who interact with the customers on a daily basis.

Being in sales, I was always curious to hear how a cross-section of customers viewed the company's products and services that I represented. I was always well aware that by virtue of the fact that a customer service person was not selling a product then that would probably allow the customer to be more frank in discussing the virtues of the company. To me, the best people to ask, "How are we doing, as a company?" are those in the customer service department. After all, they are talking to customers every day.

One day, I passed by the desk of a newly hired customer service person at a company that I was working for at the time to simply ask how her day was progressing. She looked up at me, with a forlorn look in her eyes and said, "This has been a tough day; the phone just keeps on ringing." That was one of those "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder" moments when I instinctively replied "If the phone is ringing we can answer their questions; if the phone isn't ringing, we're out of business."

I have had the great fortune in my career to have worked at some top notch information industry companies. Besides world-class products, the most successful of those companies always had highly functioning customer service departments. Oddly enough, companies with substandard customer service departments usually are not as successful. Funny how that works!

The Responsibilities of a Successful Customer Service Department

Knowledgeable, *friendly* and proficient in *language skills* are the key ingredients to fielding a successful customer service team at any company. If any of the legs on this three-legged stool are amiss, then success will be fleeting.

Knowledgeable — Recently, I had an issue with the internal CD drive on my laptop computer. I found out that the fix was relatively simple. All I had to do was contact the laptop company and buy a new CD drive from them. The good folks at **Best Buy** said that they would install it in a matter of minutes once I brought them the part. So I dutifully called the company that produced the laptop. Without mentioning the name of this company, I can safely say that their yearly revenue is in the billions of dollars and they have been and continue to manufacture millions of laptops.

Finding the 800 number was relatively easy. Finding the right person to speak to was incredibly difficult. The process of finding the right person was made even more frustrating by being subjected to hearing unlistenable music while on hold for long periods of time. The music sounded like somebody punched a hole in the speaker, thus making the song indistinguishable. Finally, found what seemed to be the right person who told me for $99.95 a new drive would be shipped out immediately. Gave him my credit card number and I thought that the deal was done.

Three days later a box arrived with nothing in it but a small piece of plastic, not a drive. Undaunted, I called the company again and was bounced around again, listened to unlistenable music again and miraculously found the same guy again who admitted his error and told me that since my laptop was older than four years that they did not stock the part anymore. Hard to believe that a multibillion dollar global company that sold millions of the same laptop as mine didn't have a drive or two available in stock, but I thanked him for his efforts.

I immediately conducted an online search, found the part in under a minute, ordered it for the cost of $29.99, received the part a few days later and the good people at **Best Buy** installed it less than 10 minutes and would not accept my offer of payment. The journey from poor customer service to excellent customer service was swift and most satisfying.

Because my customer service experience with the laptop company was so unfulfilling and time wasting, you can be assured that my next purchase of a laptop will not be with them. Poor service has an effect on revenue. Because my experience with **Best Buy** was so good, I will be using them for future purchases. Excellent service also has an effect on revenue.

The solution is that any company that claims to have a customer service department needs to make the investment in periodically training their phone people.

Friendly — Being knowledgeable is the first step. Nothing can proceed unless the people in Customer Service completely understand all the elements of the company's products, policies and pricing, and even more importantly are kept up-to-date with any changes to the aforementioned 3Ps.

I'm not a big fan of perky phone chatter and sometimes the person on the line is a bit too "up" to suit me, but I understand enthusiasm and that's good. I'll take that anytime over someone who seems bored and disinterested to answer my call. If you are dealing with the public, then at least sound interested. Having a dull customer service person is like having an airline pilot who is afraid of heights. Makes no sense!

Those of us in sales understand the concept of "Showtime." No matter what personal or business issues are on the mind of a salesperson, when in front of a customer/prospect, those problems need to exit stage right. Enthusiasm and confidence are the vey hallmarks of successful salespersons. At a face-to-face meeting those two facets of behavior come shining through. And guess what: those two aspects of behavior come across loud and clear on the phone, as well.

Language Skills — I believe that all people who want to work deserve a job commensurate with their skills and education. I also understand that large multi-national companies tend to outsource their customer service phone banks to other countries. They justify this by saying this action makes economic sense because it strengthens the bottom line revenue number.

In my travails with the global laptop computer company, it was clear to me that the people who directed me from one phone extension to another were not from this country. At one point, I had to ask the person to repeat their instructions more than once since I simply could not understand what they were saying.

Language skills not only mean correct grammar and sentence structure when speaking, but also the ability to make one understood. If you have to repeatedly ask to restate the statement, then that is a missing part of the mutual communication. Companies certainly have the right to outsource their phone centers to other countries. They have an obligation to staff those centers with people whose language skills are understood by the widest possible audience of anticipated callers. By actively monitoring the call centers' interaction with customers, the staff will be better equipped to solve whatever issues come their way and communicate those solutions effectively.

Customer Service in the Library World

In the library world, subscriptions to eContent are the norm. That means that a subscription to a database sold this year will inevitably be ready to be renewed the following year. Most information industry companies will send out renewal notices 90-120 days before the subscription lapses.

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when there were access problems, and relied on some of the same information, such as license agreements and collections assessment. Collections Assessment, which fell under Resource Management, had not included a regular analysis of ILL. Similarly, licensing, which is also a part of Resource Management, did not have a workflow in place to inform ILL which e-resources included ILL rights, and as a result the ILL team had only been loaning print materials, a fraction of the total resources available. (See Figure 2.)

Our goals in the upcoming year are to start a regular assessment of ILL and review our licenses to determine which e-resources include ILL permissions and start opening those up for lending. While it may seem overwhelming taking on additional teams and staff members, it also provides opportunity for improving processes and customer service for patrons. For those that find themselves in a challenging year due to staff shortages or an overabundance of projects we recommend viewing each challenge as an opportunity and implementing tools like Appreciative Inquiry to help inform organizational structure, practicing shared leadership in decision-making, and conducing stay interviews to ensure your current staff are being heard. Most importantly stay flexible to remain sane during stressful times and when you have the opportunity to hire, look for staff that can embrace change.

By the time you read this article, we may very well be welcoming another team to our department!

Endnotes

1. **Bosch, Stephen**, and **Kittie Henderson**. "Fracking the Ecosystem." *Library Journal*, vol. 141, no. 7, 2016., pp. 32.
2. **Somerville, MM**. "Digital Age Discoverability: A Collaborative Organizational Approach." *SERIALS REVIEW*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2013., pp. 234-239. doi:10.1080/00987913.2013.10766404

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Given the nature of the process, it is important for the library to monitor usage throughout the year and notify the sales rep and/or customer service if there are any issues to deal with. Waiting until the renewal notice shows up to discuss an issue is usually too late. The company wants the library to get maximum usage of their databases and will be helpful and supportive to accomplish this goal.

Aggregators, publishers of eContent and the myriad amount of companies selling databases to libraries depend on customer input to refine their offerings, make suggestions on improvement and most importantly want to know when their efforts are rewarding for the library's user community. That's why in this industry the lines of communication between publisher and library need to be a two-way street.

In the age of CRM's, customer service people as well as salespeople and senior management are required to document the conversations between the customer and the company. Those conversations are carefully documented and reviewed so that issues are known early in the process and those issues can be dealt with in an expeditious manner.

- Be in communication so that both the library and the publisher's goals are met.

The yardstick in measuring the success or failure of databases sold to the library rests in the interpretation of the usage reports. Most information industry companies allow the customer to check on the statistics. However, if there is no one at the library to run the usage reports, then a quick call to the sales rep or customer service department will solve that. Understanding the trends in usage is important for both the customer in making a renewal decision and the company to analyze and make improvements to the product.

Thinking about the appropriate song lyric to close this article, the choice was easy. "Keep the Customer Satisfied" written by **Paul Simon**, performed by **Simon & Garfunkel**, the song says, "Everywhere I go,

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The **Center for Research Libraries** has specific guidelines and a title list for reference sets with a fairly heavy emphasis on such "librarian-focused titles" as **ALA's** *Membership Directory*, *Books in Print*, *Ulrich's*, etc. (*https://www.crl.edu/archiving-preservation/print-archives/crl-administered/reference-book-archive/title-list*). **CRL's** title list does not include other core titles such as *Who's Who* or almanacs. Following a rationale consonant with its general shared collections mission, **CRL's** Reference Book Archive exists to gather and preserve artifactual materials that will not experience much use in the local library setting and thereby enable **CRL** members to capture local stacks space for other materials.

Searches of shared print databases such as **CRL's** PAPR and the Five College Library Shared Repository Collection online catalog reveal that core title sets such as *Who's Who in America* and *The Statesman's Year-Book* are already housed in shared print archives facilities, most likely as part of a larger serials archiving initiative. It is logical that reference sets that have a regular (usually annual) publication schedule would be included in a serials archiving program. But what of titles with irregular publication frequencies, finite sets (encyclopedias, for example), government documents that also serve as reference works, and other anomalies? It is a challenge to come up with guidelines that address all the variables of publication types. Several PAN librarians suggested that a core list of reference titles to be archived would be useful, with ISSN/ISBN as required data elements for identification and analytics purposes.

For our PALCI pilot, the lack of a suitable, affordable gap-filler software proved to be a significant roadblock, and our momentum stalled. Due to staff changes at PALCI in 2015 and 2016, the project team decided, in agreement with PALCI staff, that we would shelve the reference back run project until PALCI staffing had stabilized and the PDPA Steering Committee had a chance to reassess the project. We still feel that the goals of the project are worthy, and, after doing my scan of current practices with regard to reference sets, I am convinced that PALCI should reassess and reboot. A new PALCI Collections Advisory Council has just formed to discuss how we might leverage shared print and electronic collections, and perhaps the reference set shared print project will see new life in 2017 — stay tuned!

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I get slandered, libeled; I hear words I never heard in the Bible. And I'm one step ahead of the shoe shine. Two steps away from the county line. Just trying to keep my customers satisfied."

Mike** is currently the Managing Partner of **Gruenberg Consulting, LLC**, a firm he founded in January 2012 after a successful career as a senior sales executive in the information industry. His firm is devoted to provide clients with sales staff analysis, market research, executive coaching, trade show preparedness, product placement and best practices advice for improving negotiation skills for librarians and salespeople. His book, **"Buying and Selling Information: A Guide for Information Professionals and Salespeople to Build Mutual Success"** has become the definitive book on negotiation skills and is available on Amazon, Information Today in print and eBook, Amazon Kindle, B&N Nook, Kobo, Apple iBooks, OverDrive, 3M Cloud Library, Gale (GVRL), MyiLibrary, ebrary, EBSCO, Blio, and Chegg. **www.gruenbergconsulting.com